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ABSTRACT

This document suggests some guidelines for conducting an effective parent-teacher conference. Many schools now host "arena type" conferences, in which the teachers assemble in the gymnasium and parents seek them out. This type of setting offers no privacy and places pressure on parents and teachers to keep discussions short. Ideally, teachers and parents need to meet one on one in a private setting. In preparation for the conference, teachers should organize a file containing samples of the student's work, should review anecdotal records of observations, and should evaluate recent test results, among other things. Parents also must prepare by coming ready to ask questions. During the conference, every effort must be made to keep it comfortable, to keep it positive, to listen to the parents, and to follow up afterward. For example, after the meeting the teacher should evaluate the session and make sure that he and the parent are clear about how the student's education is progressing. It is also important to anticipate parents' questions; some sample questions, along with suggested answers, are provided for all grade levels. Teachers will have to deal with different types of parents, including those who are timid, egotistical, angry, critical, worried, and reluctant. (RJM)

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Nicholas P. Georgiady
Louis G. Romano

2002

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and Louis G. Romano

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Nicholas P. Georgiady

Louis G. Romano

Nicholas P. Georgiady, professor emeritus of educational leadership at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, has been a visiting professor at a number of universities. His professional experiences also include teaching and administration at elementary and junior high schools, serving as deputy state superintendent of schools in Michigan, and working as a consultant to American schools in the United States, Central and South America, Europe, and Asia. In 1974, Georgiady and a small group of colleagues chartered the National Middle School Association. He then served on its first board of directors and was honored at its national convention in 1979.

Louis G. Romano is a professor emeritus of educational administration at Michigan State University, founder and executive director of the Michigan Association of Middle School Educators, and a founder and former president of the National Middle School Association and the National Suburban School Superintendents Organization. He has taught and served as a consultant in Central America, South America, Asia, and Europe. Romano is the co-author of numerous books and Fastback 418 *The Middle School Distinction*, written with Nicholas P. Georgiady.

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Positive Parent-Teacher Conferences

by
Nicholas P. Georgiady
and
Louis G. Romano

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Introduction

Both teachers and parents want their children to succeed. Parent-teacher conferences are an important tool for ensuring that success. Through regular conferences, teachers and parents share what they know about the children, allowing both to accomplish more than either can accomplish alone.

Parent-teacher conferences also improve the relations between the school and the home. They provide an opportunity for teachers to explain the curriculum and to acquaint parents with the objectives of the school.

A common misconception is that conferences are held only to address poor behavior. While conferences should be held for such problems, there are many other reasons to conduct them. Conferences can allow teachers to share a child's success and accomplishments with the parents. They can supplement or take the place of a report card. They can be used to provide academic counseling or to deal with parents' concerns. But most important, conferences can help parents and teachers get acquainted.

There is little doubt that parent-teacher conferences can help students. Sattes (1985) reviewed a number of

studies and concluded that achievement gains occurred when parents were involved as supporters and reinforcers of their child's school learning and when parents were informed of their child's progress.

Most research on parent-teacher conferences focuses on the elementary grades. However, a study done by Duncan and reported by Sattes looked at a junior high school in which counselors met individually with all parents before their children entered the school. This group of students was compared with another group of students whose parents did not have individual conferences before their children entered junior high. Duncan found that the students whose parents had individual conferences 1) had better attendance, 2) had a higher mean grade point average, 3) were less likely to drop out, and 4) had parents who continued to be involved in school activities. Of those parents that did experience a personal conference, only 13% made no further contacts with the school while 73% of the non-conferenced parents made no contacts with the school (Sattes 1985, p. 11).

Unfortunately, there are several popular practices that have, at best, a questionable benefit. One practice that has become common in middle and high schools is the "arena type" conference, in which the teachers assemble in the gymnasium and the parents seek out their children's teachers. This practice violates all that is known about successful parent-teacher conferences. Because there are no assigned times for the conference, the parent has to wait in line to see a particular teacher. If the parent wishes to see more than one teacher, it can

take considerable time. One parent reported that she spent four hours to see her son's teachers. When parents do get to see the teacher, they feel a great deal of pressure because there are other parents waiting in line. In addition, parents hesitate to discuss important problems in that environment because of the lack of privacy.

Another questionable practice is the one-day conference session for all parents. Usually during these conferences, the students stay home while the parents come to school for a conference. The parents are notified by a letter announcing the date of the conference, but there are no arrangements for making specific appointments with the teacher. In these "conferences," the teacher has no idea how many parents will attend. If all the parents attend, the teacher can meet each parent for only about ten minutes. What a pressure situation!

This fastback presents a variety of suggestions and guidelines for conducting an effective parent-teacher conference. While no formula can guarantee that all conferences will be successful, following these guidelines will increase the chances that the teacher and parents will work together for the benefit of the child.

Planning for the Conference

It is essential to plan for a successful conference. Teachers need to be prepared to talk in-depth with parents about their child. There are six steps a teacher should take for each student.

1. Organize a file of pertinent samples of student's work.
2. Review anecdotal records of significant observations.
3. Review data in the student's cumulative folder.
4. Evaluate recent test results in light of the student's performance.
5. Ask other teachers with whom the child comes in contact for their observations.
6. Consider interviewing the student before the parent-teacher conference.

When taking the above steps, you should be mindful that you wish to give the parent a comprehensive overview of the student's performance, not only academic performance, but also social, emotional, and physical.

Carefully study the student's cumulative records to learn of past successes and problems. The conference will be more successful if the teacher can explain the steps being taken to work on past problems and can point out the areas in which the child is successful.

Be ready to provide examples of the child's classroom efforts. For example, is there anything on the bulletin board that was made by the child? Another example might be a tape recording of the student's work in an area where the student is improving. For example, if an elementary student is having difficulty in reading, a taped lesson could show the parent how the student is improving. Allowing the parent to hear the child succeeding definitely can get a conference off to a good start.

If the student is having difficulty, be ready to suggest special services offered by the school district. This is extremely important. It might upset a parent to know that their child has a speech or reading problem, for example; but assure the parent that the goal is to help the child overcome the particular problem. Most parents will be grateful that the teacher is concerned about their child and willing to take the time and effort to make the child's education a success.

Check with the student's other teachers to obtain some input on performance in their classes. Art, music, and physical education teachers may want to contribute information for the conference. One school district has a simple form that the teacher gives to the student's other teachers before a conference. This form enables teachers to provide parents with a picture of the student's performance in all instructional areas.

Some conferences will involve other people, such as an auxiliary teacher, a principal, a social worker, or the child. The teacher should meet with these other participants before the conference in order to avoid any surprises.

Finally, it can be useful to meet with a student before the parent-teacher conference. Let the student suggest things to discuss with the parents or provide work samples to share with the parent.

Help the Parent Prepare

Many parents do not know what their role should be in a parent-teacher conference. Those who have never attended a parent-teacher conference can see it as a very threatening experience. Thus it is important to make the parents feel comfortable both before and after the conference.

One method for telling parents what to expect is to hold a "New Parents" night early in the school year. That meeting should cover a variety of things that parents should know about the school, and one important item will be parent-teacher conferences. An ample supply of printed material on parent-teacher conferences should be available.

Another method is to distribute a conference guide to parents before their parent-teacher conference. This guide should include the following sections: What Is a Parent-Teacher Conference? How Are Conferences Scheduled? What Is the Parent's Role? What Is the Teacher's Role? and What Reports Are Sent to Parents? This guide should include questions that the parents

might ask to prepare for the conference. These questions include:

1. How is the student's behavior at home with siblings and with the parents?
2. Does the student have a hobby or show certain abilities?
3. Who are the student's friends?
4. What is the student's attitude toward school?
5. Does the student show good study habits at home?
6. Does the student have a warm relationship with the parents?
7. What recent illnesses or disability has the student experienced? What is the status of the student's health?
8. What chores is the student responsible for in the home?
9. What is there about school that the student particularly likes or dislikes?

Parents should ask their child where he or she is succeeding and what might be a problem. Is the child getting along with the other students in class? If the child could change things, what would he or she like to change? These are just a few of the questions parents can ask to help prepare for the parent-teacher conference.

One advantage to such a guide is that both parents can list their questions and concerns, even though only one parent might attend the conference.

Guidelines for Parent-Teacher Conferences

Successful parent-teacher conferences have certain characteristics in common. The parent-teacher conference has a purpose. The conference always is intended to benefit the child. It is scheduled well in advance and usually meets at the school. Teachers plan what they need to discuss in the conference and encourage parents to bring questions about their child's progress. Finally, there is some type of follow-up after the conference.

In addition to those characteristics, there are several things teachers should keep in mind when planning and conducting a conference. They should make the conference as comfortable as possible for the parent, they should keep the tone positive, and they must listen carefully to the parent.

Keep It Comfortable

Parents who have never attended a parent-teacher conference can see it as a very threatening experience. Therefore it is important for the teacher to make the

parent feel comfortable and at ease, even when the conference will address very tough issues.

It is important to meet in the classroom so that the parent can experience the environment in which the child spends a significant portion of his or her day. Place a note on the door stating, "Do not disturb. Conference in progress." Also, if possible, provide a cup of coffee, tea, a soft drink, or at least a pitcher of ice water and paper cups.

Make sure there is an adult-sized chair for the parent. One teacher had a sofa used as a reading "corner" for children. This sofa was an excellent place to discuss the child's performance. A word of caution: Do not sit behind the teacher's desk. This is sure to turn the parent off.

While teachers must present themselves in a professional manner, they should take care with how this affects the parent. Eye contact and gestures will have an effect on how the parent perceives what the teacher says. Excessive gestures can be distracting. In addition, some speech patterns can be annoying. Teachers should check with others to get honest appraisals about these traits.

Keep It Positive

When the conference begins, the first step is to establish a friendly atmosphere, free from interruptions. The teacher needs to begin the conference by enumerating the student's favorable points. The conference should end in the same way. It is important to be truthful, but the teacher also should show tact.

The teacher should be enthusiastic throughout the conference. This lets the parent know that the teacher enjoys his or her work and that the parent and teacher can work together to help the child succeed.

Parents can become very nervous if the teacher takes notes during the conference. If notes are taken, or if the teacher needs to refer to notes during the conference, those notes should be shared with the parent.

When discussing a child's problems, it is often useful to explain to parents that the child's problems are not unique. The teacher can explain that another student had a similar problem that was resolved successfully. This will help to alleviate a parent's anxiety.

If a child has a number of problems, the teacher should focus on only the important issues. The teacher also should be ready to provide any useful techniques or materials to the parent to help the parent work with the child.

One important consideration is to "Watch your language." Some words can be devastating to parents, so it is imperative for the teacher to take care when discussing the child. The following is a list of negative expressions and more positive ways to express them.

Negative Expressions	**Positive Expressions**
Must	Should
Lazy	Can do more when he tries
Uncooperative	Should learn to work with others
Cheats	Depends on others to do his work
Below average	Working at his own level
Impertinent	Discourteous

Negative Expressions	Positive Expressions
Stubborn	Insists on having his own way
Wastes time	Could make better use of time
Mean	Difficulty in getting along with others
Selfish	Seldom shares with others
Rude	Inconsiderate of others
Shows off	Tries to get attention
Troublemaker	Uses disruptive behaviors
Dumb	Can improve with individual help
Dirty, unkempt	Needs to be more concerned about personal cleanliness
Sloppy	Can do neater work
Liar	Doesn't often tell the truth
Stupid	Capable of doing better work with help
Poor grade of work	Working below his capability

In addition to avoiding negative words and phrases, teachers also should avoid using jargon. Most professionals have a language of their own, and educators are no exception. However, technical words can be stumbling blocks in the parent-teacher conference. Even such common words as *phonics, team teaching,* and *reading readiness* should be explained in more simple language. The teacher should pay attention to the parent to make sure he or she understands what is being said.

Listen to the Parent

If a parent-teacher conference is to be successful, the teacher must not monopolize the discussion. Let the parent talk at every opportunity, and listen with inter-

est. Parents are sure to add information concerning the child and will ask questions to clarify what has been presented.

Many parents will arrive at the conference with a list of concerns they wish to resolve. The teacher should address these concerns first. Let the parent take the lead. Afterward, the teacher can move the discussion to other topics.

Parents need to be involved in determining the solutions to any problem. Teachers should give parents the facts and suggest a range of possible solutions. It is best if the teacher helps the parents find their own solutions to a problem. However, a teacher should not accept a parent's suggestions if they are not a sound way to help the child. One of the teacher's goals is to help parents to better understand their child.

The most important thing for the teacher to remember is to listen closely to the parent. A parent's statements can provide many insights. The teacher needs to pay attention not only to the parent's words, but also his or her gestures and facial expressions. These clues can help construct a story for the teacher about the parent's attitudes, patterns of thinking, motives, and feelings.

For example, if the parent says, "He seldom listens when I talk," the teacher should try to determine just what concerns the parent is expressing. Perhaps the child has a hearing problem that should be checked. If the parent says, "I don't know what to do with her," that might indicate another kind of problem. What kind of standards does the parent use? Is there something about this parent-child relationship that affects the student's behavior in school?

Above all, the teacher should deal honestly with the parent. This means not only listening to the parent, but also sharing any information the teacher has. It also means not agreeing on a plan to help the child if that plan will not work. Such an action is dishonest both to the parent and the teacher.

After the Conference

It is important to record the proceedings of a conference as soon as it is over. A very useful practice is to develop a "Conference Summary Form." This form should include a place to list the outcomes of the conference, especially the steps that were agreed on for removing any deficiencies found in the child's performance. This record should be filed in the child's cumulative folder for future reference.

The teacher also should evaluate every conference after it is over. Below is a list of questions that should be included in the evaluation.

- Were the physical arrangements comfortable?
- Did I give a brief introductory statement about the purpose of the conference?
- Did I begin the conference with the parent's concerns?
- Did I listen and show interest in what was being said?
- Did I give a good overview of the strengths and weaknesses of the child both academically and socially?

- Did I show the parents samples of the child's efforts?
- If there was a serious disagreement, did the parent become confrontational?
- Did I ask leading questions to allow the parents to clarify the purpose of the conference?
- Did I allow the parent time for thought and reflections?
- Did I assure the parents of my willingness to assist in any way to help the child?
- Did I answer questions honestly? If I did not know an answer, did I admit it?
- Did I listen carefully for clues given by the parents to assist me in deciding when to talk, what to ask, and when not to talk?
- Did I share with the parents the types of resources available?
- Did I keep my vocabulary simple, explaining technical terms and avoiding jargon?
- Did I review with the parents the notes I took during the conference?
- Did the parents and I carefully define any steps needed to correct any problems?
- Did I agree to inform the parents that I would periodically send a note home concerning progress being made by their child?
- Did the parents and I agree on a plan of action?
- Was the parent willing to participate in class activities if needed?

Anticipate Parents' Questions

Below are some questions parents frequently ask teachers at conferences. Along with the question are suggestions on how you can prepare for them in advance.

Questions Asked by Elementary School Parents

What subjects will my student study?

Usually a teacher has a schedule on a bulletin board. Show the parent the schedule and discuss the units of study on which the students are working at the time. You might show the parent the textbooks and other instructional materials being used.

How is reading taught?

Parents of young children often ask this question. Show them the reading textbooks and some of the activities, such as the use of a workbook and flash cards. Discuss how students are grouped, how phonics is stressed, and how individual differences are met.

Is penmanship stressed?

Point to the penmanship charts on the bulletin board and explain how "manuscript" writing is taught in the early grades and is followed by cursive writing.

Is science taught?

Effective schools have a well-defined, printed curriculum guide that shows the scope and sequence of science units from kindergarten through fifth grade. Explain some of the activities taking place in the current science unit. This question also is an opportunity to determine if the parents have special talents that they can share with the class.

What are social studies?

Many parents did not have a social studies class. Instead, they studied history and geography. Quite a few parents believe that the traditional subjects have been abandoned. Stress to these parents that these areas are closely related, so it is logical for them to be studied together. Share with the parents just what the students are studying.

Will there be assigned homework?

There may not be formal homework in the primary grades. Instead, young children may be assigned simple activities. Generally, there will be homework in the intermediate grades. The teacher should emphasize how parents can help the child by providing a quiet study corner with proper lighting and making sure that the television is turned off. In addition, explain to parents how they can help their child without the parents doing the homework.

What do you mean by working at grade level?

Explain that the child is performing at the expected level of students in his grade. If the child is having difficulties in certain subjects, show that the materials and activities he is using usually are used by children at a lower level.

What tests are given to my child?

Explain the testing program, both teacher-written tests and any standardized tests given. Explain why the standardized tests are given and how are they used to help the child.

What system of grading do you use?

Parents lived with grades in their schooling. Explain carefully the basis for the grading system and be ready to show examples of test and grades given for projects.

Why do you take field trips?

Explain how a field trip is tied in with a particular unit of study and how it reinforces the classroom learning. If a field trip guide was developed for a particular trip, share it with the parent.

What is your discipline policy?

Usually the school's discipline policy is written. Give the parent a copy and discuss any part that needs explanation.

I learned that my child took an intelligence test. What is my child's score?

Explain to the parents what the IQ indicates and whether their child is working up to his ability. Assure

the parent that the IQ score is only an indicator of the child's intelligence at the time.

Does my child follow directions?

Point out specific instances where the child does follow directions. If the child does not follow directions, then explain the circumstances and the steps you are taking to help the child improve in this area.

How can I motivate my child?

There are a number of things the parents can do, such as encourage the child, support him or her when there is a setback, and praise the child loudly for successes so that he or she is aware of and values success. Remind them that support is a valuable motivator to the child.

Does my child complete his work satisfactorily?

If the answer is "yes," then show the parent some of the completed work. If the answer is "no," then explain why the child is having problems in completing the work satisfactorily. Also point out how the parent can help support homework efforts.

How can I help my child gain new friends?

It is important that children have friends. Teachers should suggest various activities that can help, such as participating on teams or clubs, holding a birthday party, or placing the child in a study group made up of one or two of the popular students in the class.

Questions Asked by Middle School and High School Parents

Why is my child loaded down with homework?

First the teacher needs to learn in which subject is the child overloaded with homework. While the teacher can explain the homework policies of the school, the teacher should point out that individual teachers can interpret that policy in different ways. In addition, point out that, as a student moves to the higher grades, more homework may be demanded. The teacher also should determine whether the child actually does have excessive homework or simply has a special project due.

How do you grade my child?

Usually there is a policy on grading, and it is imperative that the policy is explained to the parent. If a parent is concerned about another teacher's method of grading, then the teacher conducting the conference should discuss this matter with the grading teacher and then report to the parent by phone or letter.

What subjects do you recommend my child take in high school?

This topic should be discussed with all eighth-grade students and their parents in the spring.

Does my child get along with other students?

Without friends, school can be a miserable experience for a student. Students without friends may express their misery in an antisocial manner, which can lead to dropping out of school. Every effort should be made by both you and the parent to find ways to promote suitable friendships.

Does my child have the capability to go to college?

Parents need to know if their student has the capability for college study and, more important, is the child performing well enough for college. The teacher should have this information handy and be ready to discuss it with the parent.

Which college should our child attend?

Usually, the school counselor will plan sessions to discuss college admission. Assure the parent that you will follow through and ask for a counselor-parent conference.

Where can we get help in completing college applications? Where can we get information about financial help?

Give the parent the phone number and the office number of the guidance office.

Our child does not read books. How can we help?

Try to determine what the child's interests are and suggest books on that topic. Another technique is to take the child to a local book store or community library and help the child find something that excites him or her.

Does my child need a public library card?

Point out that some projects need extensive reading and that the school's library may not have many of the references needed. A library card would provide more references.

Have you noticed any special talents in my child?

If the child has shown a special talent, point it out to the parent. If you have samples of his or her perfor-

mance, share them. If you feel the child has some talent and is not performing, then point this out to the parent.

How can I help my child at home?

Describe some of the good study habits needed at home, such as providing a quiet environment with no music or television.

Handling Different Types of Parents

All families are different, as are all students. The teacher needs to be able to work with all types of parents, regardless of their circumstances. Many families today face problems resulting from poverty or divorce. In other families, both parents work outside the home. And there are a significant number of teenage parents.

Educators must work closely with these parents to find ways to make their children find success in school. Thus it is imperative that there is flexibility in scheduling parent-teacher conferences. There must be alternative provisions for parents who cannot meet the regular conference schedule. Some schools have scheduled conferences before school opens, during the lunch hour, and in the evening after dinner. In some cases, teachers go to the student's home for the conference.

One school district worked with parents to schedule conferences once a month on Saturdays. Refreshments, child care, supervised physical education activities, special help in certain subjects, and other special services

were available to the children as the parent conferred with the teacher.

Other services schools should consider are using translators for conferences with a parent who does not speak English. The translator could be a bilingual parent. In this case, the teacher also will need to have any written materials translated so that the parent can understand them. Also, in order to accommodate poor parents, the school should consider providing child care and transportation to the school.

In addition to socioeconomic problems the parents might have, there also are different personality types that the teacher will face. Teachers need to be prepared to deal with these. Some common examples include:

- *The timid parent.* The teacher should ask questions that cannot be answered with a simple yes or no. That helps to draw out the parent. The teacher also should be as friendly as possible without overdoing it.
- *The egotistical parent.* The teacher should never try to deflate this parent's ego. Doing so will make that parent the teacher's enemy, thus destroying any chance to work together for the good of the child. Instead, use the parent's abilities as a resource.
- *The critical parent.* Don't argue. However, do try to inform the parent by using both facts and an appeal to the emotions. Talk about areas in which you are well equipped to speak. Admit that educators do not have all the answers.
- *The worried parent.* Recognize the parent's worry and respect it. If a child is doing satisfactorily, let

the parent know it immediately. Assure the parent that few problems in child adjustment or learning are insoluble. Plan together to solve problems and to maintain communication. This usually relieves a worried person's mind.

- *The reluctant parent.* If a parent is reluctant to go to the school, consider alternative sites, such as a church, library, home, or workplace.

The Angry Parent

It would be wonderful if all parent conferences were successful and if all parents were completely satisfied with the outcomes. Unfortunately, some parents will become irate. If the parent becomes abusive or threatening, then the teacher should quickly arrange for another conference with the principal in attendance. The principal may even suggest another procedure for dealing with the parent.

It is best to defuse such situations before they get out of control. The angry parent should be allowed to vent his or her feelings, which usually are directed at what is happening in the classroom. The teacher should listen and be ready with a constructive response.

When working with an angry parent, the teacher should remember the following guidelines:

1. Do not show any animosity, even though the parent may show signs of anger.
2. Listen to all of the parent's complaints.
3. Write down the parent's suggestions to improve the situation.

4. Provide the documentation to show the student's academic or behavior problem.
5. Present definite plans for solving the problem. Emphasize that both teacher and parent must work together to resolve the problem.
6. Make plans to follow up on the plans to which the teacher and parent mutually agreed.

The teacher must be careful not to show his or her own anger in these cases. That will only upset the parent further and will destroy any chance of working together. Also, do not belittle the parent by pointing out that their anger is inappropriate. Keep in mind that to help the child, both the teacher and parent must work cooperatively.

Finally, encourage the parent to become involved in the PTA. Often, working with other parents provides an opportunity for them to discuss mutual problems and to feel better about the school.

Conclusion

The parent-teacher conference is a vital tool in education. There is no other procedure that is as effective for bringing parents and teachers together for the benefit of the child, not only academically, but socially, emotionally, and physically.

Teachers should prepare carefully for each conference with a parent. They should gather all the materials they will need, including samples of the student's work that the teacher will wish to share with the parent. They also should help the parent prepare for the conference. In this way, the parent-teacher conference is likely to be very productive.

Teachers should remember that a parent-teacher conference is a chance for both parties to voice their concerns. If the teacher really listens to the parent and takes him or her seriously, the teacher can learn much that will help the child. And if the parent is involved in formulating solutions to any problems, the results can be extraordinary.

Resources

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